

“ARE WE ALSO HERE FOR THAT?”: INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGIT – TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE, OR CRITICAL THEORY?

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Abstract / Résumé

The government of Nunavut has prioritized the application of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*—Inuit “traditional knowledge”—via a policy of consultation with Elders. While the substantial body of oral history that is being produced in Nunavut thus plays a role in the political life of the territory, it also represents a potential source of Inuit critical theory, as Elders convey and comment upon their history, geography, and storytelling/song traditions. This article provides an overview of oral history and *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* in Nunavut, and argues that publications such as Nunavut Arctic College’s recent *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series deserve greater recognition in southern academic institutions – not only as historical and cultural artifacts, but as critical and theoretical texts.

Le gouvernement du Nunavut a priorisé l’application de l’*Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (« connaissances traditionnelles » inuites) par le biais d’une politique de consultation des anciens. Bien que l’important ensemble d’histoires orales produites au Nunavut joue ainsi un rôle dans la vie politique du territoire, il représente également une source potentielle de théorie critique inuite, car les anciens transportent et commentent leur histoire, leur géographie et leurs traditions en matière de chansons et de contes. L’article offre un aperçu de l’histoire orale et de l’*Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* au Nunavut et met de l’avant que des publications telles que la récente série *Interviewing Inuit Elders* du Collège de l’Arctique du Nunavut méritent une meilleure reconnaissance de la part des établissements universitaires du sud du pays, non seulement à titre d’artefacts historiques et culturels, mais aussi à titre de textes critiques et théoriques.

In 2006, the RCMP filed a 725-page internal report to address allegations that police officers stationed in the Arctic between 1950 and 1970 had systematically slaughtered sled-dogs in an effort to force Inuit to move into permanent settlements. The report declared that “despite the thousands of pages reviewed, there is no documentary evidence, or *any anecdotal or oral history other than that of certain Inuit Elders*, to support these allegations” (RCMP 5, my emphasis). On December 6, one week after the report was tabled in the House of Commons, the Qikiqtani Inuit Association¹ and the Makivik Corporation² released a joint statement, expressing their frustration with the RCMP’s self-exoneration. “‘From Kuujuarapik to the High Arctic, there is clear evidence the RCMP and other persons in authority killed Inuit sled dogs systematically and determinedly,’ said [Makivik President] Pita Aatami, ‘to state otherwise is to say that Inuit Elders who live thousands of miles from each other have conspired to lie’” (Makivik, “Press” 1). The Inuit organizations had already been making arrangements for a Truth Commission, which would provide a forum for Inuit accounts of the dog slaughter, and in 2008 a series of hearings were held in thirteen Baffin communities (“Qikiqtani”).³

Meanwhile, in January 2007, *Maclean’s* magazine published an article entitled “The Myth of the Sled Dog Killings,” which discussed the “clash between Native lore and White history” that the RCMP’s report had provoked (Taylor). The author, Peter Shawn Taylor, wrote that “oral history [makes] a better source for emotions than statistics,” and that “to conflate all this into a government conspiracy appears slanderous and untrue.” Although the RCMP review team attempted to gain access to Makivik’s interviews with Inuit Elders,⁴ it also implicitly questioned the accuracy of “those Inuit Elders who believe...what they remember seeing some 35 to 55 years ago, or being told of by their families...” (RCMP 5). As Jack Granatstein, professor emeritus of History at York University, told *Maclean’s*, “[i]f there is a basic rule of oral history...it’s that ‘Old men forget and they remember selectively’” (qtd. in Taylor).

These statements demonstrate a peculiar amnesia that tends to afflict non-Native administrators and experts (especially during discussions of Aboriginal rights and redress) as they invoke the apparent contrast between the written and the oral: the idea that theirs is a tradition of facts and of reason, of documentation and of empirical truths, while the knowledge of Indigenous peoples is allegedly fluid, intuitive, and ultimately unreliable.⁵ Advocates of this binary forget, as J. Edward Chamberlin points out, that “the most important institutions of [Western] culture—the churches, the courts, and the parliaments—are places where speech has a considerable presence” (“From Hand to Mouth”

138-139). But for many, somehow, witnessing, remembering, and speechmaking seem to lose their validity outside of particular institutional configurations. So when the law enforcers (the RCMP) become the accused, oral testimony is suddenly reduced to the status of gossip and hearsay.

Despite these persistent biases, the notion that Elders have certain expertise—what is often referred to as Indigenous “traditional knowledge”—has increasingly appeared on the radar of government policy bureaus and of universities. As Ellen Bielawski wrote in a 1992 article on Inuit traditional knowledge:

Current thinking recommends that arctic scientists and those who use their work (managers and policy makers) resolve the conflict [between Inuit and scientific ways of knowing] by recognizing the continuing existence and value of Indigenous knowledge (also called ‘traditional’, or ‘local’ knowledge). Canada’s former minister of the environment has written: “Our task is to integrate traditional knowledge and science.”

Government offices like Environment Canada or Indian and Northern Affairs regularly make efforts to consult with local Aboriginal experts; whether or not this indicates a sincere acknowledgment of Indigenous expertise—rather than a nod to political correctness—is open to debate. Meanwhile, particular sectors of the academy—such as Native Studies—have worked quite seriously to prioritize the integration of Indigenous intellectual traditions. In 2003, for instance, scholars Peter Kulchyski, Don McCaskill, and David Newhouse gathered the teachings of sixteen Indigenous Elders into a volume entitled *In the Words of Elders: Aboriginal Cultures in Transition*, and discussed the importance of “showing a new respect for the thought of Aboriginal cultural, spiritual, artistic, and political leaders...[and for] providing a greater legitimacy in academic settings for the teachings of those leaders” (Kulchyski, McCaskill, and Newhouse xi).

The territory of Nunavut—now ten years old—is in many ways a model of this institutionalization of Elders’ expertise. The Government of Nunavut (GN) is committed to “ensuring that Inuit culture and language [are] an integral part of the society,” and one of its primary strategies for achieving this goal is the incorporation of *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit*⁶ (*IQ*), or Inuit traditional knowledge, into the workings of all government offices (Government).⁷ As Qikiqtani Inuit Association policy analyst Jaypetee Arnakak explains, *IQ* is not a set or finite body of knowledge; rather, it is “a set of teachings on practical truisms about society, human nature and experience passed on orally (traditionally) from one genera-

tion to the next.... It is holistic, dynamic and cumulative in its approach to knowledge, teaching and learning..." (Arnakak). *IQ* is difficult to pin down or to define, but is most readily manifested in the knowledge and memories of Nunavut Elders, who are able to provide information about what Inuit life was like before residential schools, welfare initiatives, and permanent settlements changed the face of Arctic Canada.

Like Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* is attracting more and more interest in the South, especially as wildlife management officials have to negotiate with Inuit assessments and protocols, which are often radically different from their own.⁸ Stories of disagreements over wildlife quotas and appropriate methods of conservation appear in the Northern media almost constantly, and often generate heated debates about Indigenous "beliefs" versus Western "science." As the sled-dog controversy demonstrates, many Southerners still do not have a great deal of confidence in Inuit as scholars of their own reality. *IQ* may be tolerated for its romantic appeal, but it has yet to be taken seriously as an intellectual tradition.

With increasing calls in Native Studies for the recognition of Indigenous intellectual traditions, *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* will no doubt be a term that students and scholars will have the pleasure of grappling with, and this will be facilitated by the availability of texts produced by Inuit oral history projects. My aim here is to give a brief overview of oral history and *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* in Nunavut, and to explore the possibility of reading Elders' texts as sources of literary criticism – in other words, to consider the potential role of *IQ* in literary studies. After all, while Elders' narratives are often consulted for principles that guide policy, administration, and everyday life, they also have a great deal to say about stories and storytelling. My belief is that publications like Nunavut Arctic College's recent *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series provide an important critical context not only for the study of Inuit literature, but also for the broader pursuit of "responsible, ethical and Indigenous-centered criticisms."

Oral History and *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit*

The Nunavut Department of Human Resources states on its website that "[i]t is the department's mandate to incorporate *IQ* in the delivery of our programs and services. Our policies and practices must be consistent with the beliefs, customs, values and the language of Inuit" ("Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit"). The primary sources for these cultural principles are the memories of Inuit Elders, and as a result, the years of political organizing that resulted in the creation of Nunavut were also marked by a renewed interest in the collection of oral traditions (Laugrand, "Écrire"

98). Christianization, tuberculosis, residential schools, community relocation, and the influence of television have all interfered with the transmission of Inuit knowledge, but the life-narratives of Elders can help to compensate for these interruptions. As Laugrand says, “[I]es Inuit devenaient maintenant les acteurs principaux d’un mouvement destiné à valoriser et sauvegarder leurs traditions” (“Écrire” 98).⁹ As a result, institutions and communities across the Arctic have established oral history or oral traditions projects, and several of these have resulted in published volumes.

In 1976, for example, a small collection entitled *Stories from Pangnirtung*—the result of a series of locally-initiated interviews with eleven Elders—was published by Hurtig, with illustrations by renowned Iglulingmiut artist Germaine Arnaktauyok (Akulujuk et al.). In 1989, Hattie Mannik began interviewing members of the Baker Lake Elders group, and in 1998 she published *Inuit Nunamiut: Inland Inuit*, a collection of Elders’ memories and reflections. This project was funded by various governmental offices and organizations, such as the Government of the Northwest Territories Department of Culture and Communications’ Oral Traditions and Cultural Enhancement programs, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, and the Nunavut Research Institute (NRI). In 1998, NRI and the Royal Ontario Museum published *The Arctic Sky: Inuit Astronomy, Star Lore, and Legend*—the product of John MacDonald’s work with the Igloolik Oral History Project. In 1999, the life-histories of a family of Pond Inlet women—Apphia Agalakti Awa, Rhoda Kaukjak Katsak, and Sandra Pikujak Katsak—were published by Nancy Wachowich under the title *Saqiyuq: Stories from the Lives of Three Inuit Women*. And in 2004, McGill-Queen’s University Press produced *Uqalurait: An Oral History of Nunavut*—the result of more than ten years of work by David Webster, Suzanne Evaloardjuk, Peter Irniq, Uriash Puqiqnak, David Serkoak, John Bennett, Susan Rowley, and dozens of Nunavut Elders (Bennett and Rowley).

Nunavut Arctic College (NAC), meanwhile, has made an enormous contribution to the body of Inuit oral history; since 1999, it has published five volumes in its *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series (*Introduction, Perspectives on Traditional Law, Childrearing Practices, Cosmology and Shamanism*, and *Perspectives on Traditional Health*), three volumes in its *Memory and History in Nunavut* series (*Representing Tuurngait, Inuit Recollections on the Military Presence in Iqaluit*, and *Keeping the Faith*), and four volumes in its *Inuit Perspectives on the 20th Century* series (*The Transition to Christianity, Travelling and Surviving on our Land, Dreams and Dream Interpretation*, and *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit: Shamanism and Reintegrating Wrongdoers into the Community*). All of these volumes

are available in both Inuktitut and English. The College is also currently publishing a series of books entitled *Life Stories of Northern Leaders*, which features the recollections of several prominent Inuit politicians: Abraham Okpik, John Amagoalik, Paul Quassa, James Arvaluk, and Peter Itinnuar. Like other publications released by NAC, these life-histories are instrumental not only in preserving an Inuit view of Northern history, but in fleshing out the narrative of Inuit self-determination. Unfortunately, Nunavut Arctic College's remarkable body of work is not yet in wide distribution.

Many more oral histories have been collected, but have yet to find their way into print. The Angmarlik Interpretive Centre in Pangnirtung, for instance, has a number of taped interviews with Elders (many of whom are now deceased); some of these have been translated into English and incorporated into various research projects, but to my knowledge, no plans for further transcription or publication are currently in place.¹⁰ The archives of the Igloolik Oral History Project, meanwhile, contain a great deal of unpublished material;¹¹ part of this collection is also housed at the NWT Archives in Yellowknife, along with the Ulukhaqtuurmiut (Holman Region) History project, the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation Elders Project, and many others. The Baker Lake Hunters and Trappers Organization and Inuit Heritage Centre have also sponsored a number of other oral history and land use studies; the resulting reports contain incredibly detailed maps, stories, and legends about Utkuhiksalingmiut and Akilinirmiut territory.¹² These are only a few examples of the existing cultural organizations and archives.

Projects of this kind fulfill an important cultural function; as the editors of the first volume of Nunavut Arctic College *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series put it, “[i]n a rapidly changing society, the preservation of the knowledge of the Inuit Elders is of great value to the cultural identity of modern Inuit” (Angmaalik et al. 1). Frédéric Laugrand reminds us, however, that oral history projects have a political dimension as well (“Écrire” 102). In the case of land use and occupancy projects—such as the 1976 ITC¹³-commissioned *Inuit Land Use and Occupancy Project* led by Milton Freeman, or the 1977 *Our Footprints Are Everywhere: Inuit Land Use and Occupancy in Labrador*—oral histories are tied directly to land claims. Laugrand expands upon this, arguing that in accordance with the political movements of the 1970s and ‘80s, oral traditions have also been used to create a sense of a collective social memory – “une prise de parole jugée nécessaire à une époque où l’idéologie dominante consiste précisément à nier les différences culturelles” (“Écrire” 102).¹⁴ In other words, Elders’ reminiscences have a nation-building function; indeed, the concept of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* is in many ways a political tool.

Beyond the creation of a collective memory, the act of remembering and of telling stories about the past might itself be thought of as a deeply political act. Elders' testimonies give Inuit a venue in which to tell (or read) their own version of history, and they bring a particular reality to the history of Arctic administration, as Inuit talk about the experience of residential school, of the deaths of their dogs, of life in the settlements, of relatives who disappeared into medical ships and never returned. In this context, oral histories become acts of resistance, or of healing. Inuit also have the opportunity to remember, or to conjure, the time before the rapid cultural changes of the late-twentieth century; autoethnographic narratives about the ways of the *inummarit*—the “real Inuit”—are radical and empowering, particularly in the hands and ears of Inuit youth. Furthermore, the implicit recognition of Elders as *scholars of an intellectual tradition* marks an important step in the dismantling of cultural hierarchies.

Oral history projects, then, in many ways are efforts to canonize Inuit knowledge. But as Alexina Kublu, Frédéric Laugrand, and Jarich Oosten outline in the introduction to the *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series, this is a problematic task, largely because of the very real differences in Inuit and *qallunaat* understandings of knowledge and knowledge production. As the editors explain, “[m]ost ethnographic texts tend to reconstruct Inuit knowledge as an objective body of knowledge. The idea that knowledge should be objective and true has a long history in the West” (Angmaalik et al. 8). This desire for objectivity and authority, however, necessarily separates knowledge from its context; in an effort to move from specific examples to general theories and conclusions, knowledge is “freed...from the constraints of social relationships” (Angmaalik et al. 8). For Inuit audiences, the editors argue, this is a method that makes absolutely no sense. “In Inuit society, we are dealing with a completely different tradition of knowledge. All knowledge is social by nature and the idea of objectified true knowledge holds little attraction or fascination” (9). Indeed, in an article entitled “What Is Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit?” Jaypetee Arnakak admits that he “deliberately tried to keep *IQ* from becoming an official policy, knowing that separating *IQ* from the contemporary realities renders something that is profound, enriching and alive into something that is meaningless, sterile, and awkwardly exclusionary” (Arnakak).

The purpose of these observations is not to declare that “Inuit do not generalize,” as such a statement would—ironically—provide exactly the kind of convenient conclusion that I am trying to avoid. Furthermore, Inuit have never been overly concerned about adapting those Southern practices (like the generalizing institutionalization of knowledge) which

struck them as useful. In the process of infusing administrative policy with traditional knowledge, for instance, the Government of Nunavut ultimately *has* codified Inuit knowledge in a way that makes it accessible to Southern governments, and easily applicable in various bureaucratic settings (Laugrand, “Écrire” 99). Most descriptions of *IQ*, however, guard against totalization by explaining that it is a diverse and flexible canon of knowledge.¹⁵ In the process of transforming Nunavut, “our land,” into a federally-recognized territory, Inuit discourse has adapted Southern methods for strategic purposes.

For example, during the Nunavut Arctic College course which resulted in the *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series, participants reported finding the college’s setting and procedures a bit discomfiting, but ultimately useful. “The interview situation was by no means a normal situation,” the editors explain, “as Elders are held in great respect, students were not accustomed to subjecting them to long lists of questions” (Angmaalik et al. 2). The unfamiliar context of the classroom, however, created a space in which this breach of conduct could be acceptable, and the Elders encouraged the students to question them (Angmaalik et al. 3-7). As Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet) Elder Elisapee Ootoova put it, “[y]ou shouldn’t be wary of asking us any questions as we are not at home” (Angmaalik et al. 4). The editors explain further that students struggled with the process of writing their course-papers, which seemed to require them to talk about the Elders’ stories in a strangely general and objective way. Ultimately, though, the papers were

written from a totally different perspective, in which the authority of the Elders remains unchallenged. In this way, the students succeeded in connecting traditional patterns of thought and knowledge to modern Western ones. We hope that in the future, young Inuit will be more and more successful in integrating their own ways of thinking with the requirements of modern Western society. It is quite clear that if Inuit are to succeed in preserving their own cultural identity, they should not just adopt Western ideas and values, but transform them so that they make sense in their own society and culture. (Angmaalik et al. 12)

So rather than creating an unbreachable chasm between Western knowledge systems and *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit*, I would simply like to highlight some of the characteristics of Inuit intellectual discourse, many of which have to do with the importance of *contextualizing* knowledge.

As Kublu, Laugrand and Oosten point out, one of the most consistent features in the Elders’ testimony was the stipulation—usually given at the beginning of a session—that the Elders were only going to speak

about things that they had personally experienced, rather than things that they had only heard about. The editors quote the following discussion between Julia Shaimaiyuk (one of the students), and Saullu Nakasuk and Pauloosie Angmarlik from Pangnirtung:

Julia: Sometimes when you are telling about something, I hear you saying, “I can’t talk about what I haven’t experienced.” Did you get told...?

Saullu: Yes.

Julia: One is not to talk about something without having experienced it?

Saullu: Yes. One is not to talk about something just from hearsay, because it is too easy to speak a falsehood. It is not desirable to tell untruths. (Angmaalik et al. 5)

Throughout the *Interviewing Inuit Elders Series*, students raise topics that the Elders may not have personal experience with; at times, they explain that they cannot answer: “Nobody ever really told me the full story so I can’t pass it on to you,” says Lucassie Nutaraaluk of Iqaluit;¹⁶ “I don’t want to guess, since nobody has ever really told me the whole story” (Aupilaarjuk et al., *Law* 185). At times, though, the Elders indicate that they have heard about the topic from another person, and may share a few details – though always with the qualification that the knowledge is second-hand. “I can tell you the story as I heard it,” Nutaraaluk says (Aupilaarjuk et al., *Law* 183).

As Kublu, Laugrand, and Oosten explain, these protocols lead to a body of knowledge that—once again—is dynamic and variable (Angmaalik et al. 9-10). “Each Elder had his own knowledge and experience and was prepared to acknowledge the value of different opinions and experiences related by others,” the editors write, and “[i]n the course of the interviews, the Elders professed great interest in each other’s comments” (Angmaalik et al. 10). Laugrand has written elsewhere that the idea of establishing a communal Inuit identity and cultural history is unappealing to many Elders: “Pour eux, une telle opération risque d’aboutir à des généralisations abusives et peu compatibles avec leur souci de respecter la diversité des expériences, des traditions et des histoires locales” (“Écrire” 100).¹⁷ As Nutaraaluk says when asked to tell the story of Sedna, “I’ll tell you the story as I heard it. I think our stories vary from community to community even though they are the same *unikkaqtuat*. I want you to know there are variations” (Aupilaarjuk et al., *Law* 188). This diversity, however, provides a real challenge for Southern scholars, who are often eager to reconcile differences, iron out inconsistencies, and work toward the development of theories.

Richard Dauenhauer and Nora Marks Dauenhauer (Tlingit) explain

that they “prefer to offer details of ordinary lives, and report what actually happened to identifiable people, in contrast to making generalized abstractions about ‘the culture’ or how ‘they’ used to do things ‘in the old days’” (*Haa Kusteeyí xi*). Likewise, the critical discourse of Inuit Elders is geared toward the telling of individual truths, rather than the discovery of Truths, as the latter will – ironically – almost always be too general to be accurate. The genre of Inuit oral history, therefore, is an effective way of ensuring that knowledge transmitted through life histories remains grounded in the context of individual and local experience.

Bringing *IQ* into Literary Studies

Nunavut oral histories provide a series of texts of great cultural and political value to Nunavummiut¹⁸ as well as to outside researchers. However, I would like to argue that these texts can also offer essential critical context for the (still nascent) study of Inuit literature, and perhaps of Indigenous literatures more generally. The restrictions against generalizations and overarching theories discussed above happily complicate any attempt to derive a set of firm or universally-applicable principles for literary analysis; however, following the institutionalization of *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit*, I believe that the words of Elders provide an important foundation for further study in the field. The remainder of this essay represents only a brief foray into the project of re-reading or re-purposing Elders’ texts as literary criticism. I hope, however, to provide a glimpse of the intellectual richness and complexity of Inuit oral histories, and to demonstrate their potential as caches not only for cultural data, but for literary and critical theory. In other words, while Elders and their knowledge may be ‘traditional,’ they are also contemporary, adaptable, and therefore not only relevant but essential to the study of Inuit intellectual traditions.

In the telling of oral histories, the Elders cover many topics – from their own personal histories, to discussions of traditional means of subsistence, health practices, and governance. Yet in and around these subjects are discussions of songs, of stories, and of storytelling. For example, in the introductory volume to the *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series, the students had the following exchange with Hervé Paniaq, an Elder from Igloodik:

Were you told unikkaaqtuat [when you were a child]?

Paniaq: Just any old story?¹⁹

Can you tell us a story that you have heard?

Paniaq: Yes, are we also here for that?

The reason why we are here is to leave words behind for our descendants.

Paniaq: There is one person [Alexina Kublu²⁰] who can tell a story now. She taped one today and two the other day. If we start story-telling now, the day is going to be too short. (Angmaalik et al. 52-53)

Paniaq's surprise at being asked to tell an *unikkaaqtuaq*²¹—a classic tale, or “myth”—in the midst of his life history is evidence of an important distinction in Inuit storytelling. In clarifying the parameters of the discussion, he seemed to be differentiating the kind of story that he was telling—*inuusirminik unikkaaq*,²² or life story, from the kind of story that the student requested—an *unikkaaqtuaq*, or traditional story. *Unikkaaq* and *unikkaaqtuaq* quite evidently have the same root, meaning “narrate,” or “tell a story” (Dorais, *Parole* 170). *Unikkaaq* is a fairly general term for “story”; as Peter Irniq says, it “could be any story.”²³ *Unikkaalangajunga*, you could say, “I am going to tell a story,” and it could be about the trip you took last week, or about a time when your parents were young.²⁴ *Unikkaaqtuaq*, however, is a more specific genre, and as soon as it is mentioned, the definition of *unikkaaqtuaq* seems to narrow. The glossaries of the *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series, for instance, define *unikkaaqtuat* as “traditional stories,” “stor[ies] passed from generation to generation,” “old stor[ies],” and “very old stories,” while the definitions for *unikkaat*, which follow immediately after, are “modern stories” and “stor[ies] of recent origin” (Angmaalik et al. 213; Ekho and Ottokie 136; Attagutsiak et al. 318). As Peter Irniq explains, “Unipkaaqtuat are “legends” such as Kiviui. They are from another time, and at another place.”²⁵

The distinction here *seems* to be temporal; *unikkaat* happen in time that people (or their grandparents) can remember, while *unikkaaqtuat* are located in a kind of mythological time, when the world was a bit different. This explanation, however, is complicated by the ending that creates the latter term: *-tuaq*. Louis-Jacques Dorais explains that *-tuaq* is “a lexicalized form of *-tuaqtaq* or *-tuagaq*.” *-tuar-* is a frequentative (“does it frequently, or for a long time”) and *-taq* or *-gaq* is the passive form. So, *unikkaqtuagaq* [became] *unikkaqtuaq* [meaning] “which is told for a long time.”²⁶ In *La parole inuit: langue, culture, et société dans l'Arctique nord-américain*, Dorais writes that “*unikkaatuaq*” designates “toute histoire de bonne longueur rapportent des événements récents ou remontant à un passé pas trop lointain” (170).²⁷ Here, the sense of *unikkaaqtuat* happening in the distant past vanishes in favour of a denotation that the story is simply very long. Saila Michael confirms this definition, explaining that an *unikkaaqtuaq* is a story that goes on for a very long time, *regardless* of its temporal setting.²⁸ If this was the definition that Hervé Paniaq was working with, it could explain why he was

reluctant to interrupt his life history: “If we start story-telling now, the day is going to be too short” (Angmaalik et al. 53).

However, the telling of *unikkaaqtuat* also requires a breach of the earlier mentioned protocol about speaking from personal experience. Almost by definition, an *unikkaaqtuaq* is a story that has been handed down from person to person, and therefore does not reflect the experience of the teller. The truth of the tale cannot be verified. The teller’s concern, however, does not seem to be so much with the possible fictionality of the story; indeed, as the following exchange demonstrates, Elders often assert that the old stories are true, or that they *were* true – only at a time when the world was somewhat different:

*Were the stories about animals turning into humans true?
[Taimaqai takkua inuruuqqaningit sulimmata?]*

[Emile] Imaruittuq: They were probably true. That’s why there are stories about this. [*Sulingmata kisiani taimauvaktuq.*]

[Lucassie] Nutaraaluk: They have to be true. [*Taimaak kisiani sulimmata...*] All animals could turn into people, according to what we were told. They turned into people a long time ago before there was Christianity. (Aupilaarjuk et al., *Law* 196; *Maligatuqaliriniup* 203)

Or, as Uqsuralik Ottokie of Kinngait put it, “At one time these stories were true, but because they are so old they just became stories” (Ekho and Ottokie 114).²⁹ The greater concern for tellers of *unikkaaqtuat*, in fact, seems to be *getting the words right*. The Elders interviewed for the *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series are all telling *inuusirmunik unikkaat*—life stories—and as such, they are all storytellers. However, the moments where they draw attention to their *ability* as storytellers, or to the form in which stories are told, occur overwhelmingly in relation to the *unikkaaqtuat*. When the students are interviewing the Igloodik Elder Emile Imaruittuq, they ask him to tell the story of Kaugjagjuk, the orphan. “I can tell you the story of Kaugjagjuk,” he says, “but I am not a very good story teller” (Aupilaarjuk et al., *Law* 186).³⁰ They then ask him if he has heard about Ailaq and Papik (188).³¹ “I’ve heard about them,” Imaruittuq says, “but I’m a very bad story teller. As I keep telling you, I’m terrible at telling stories” (Aupilaarjuk et al. *Law* 188). In the first volume of the same series, we hear something similar from Alexina Kublu before she tells the *unikkaaqtuat* that she heard from her father, Michel Kupaaq Piugattuk: “I am not what in Inuktitut is considered to be an ‘*uqamminiq*’ someone who is linguistically nimble,” she says (Angmaalik et al. 151).³² There is a strong sense of the way in which *unikkaaqtuat* are supposed to be told; these issues are far less prominent in the context of *inuusirmunik unikkaat*, or life-stories. *Unikkaaqtuat*, then, seem to be sto-

ries in which the *way* something is told is almost as important as *what* is told. This attention to language or narrative skill, I would argue, hovers very near the idea of the *literary*—a mode in which form matters as much as content.

The complexity of these generic distinctions—which have been outlined here only briefly—would merit a much fuller discussion. For the moment, however, I hope simply to demonstrate that an Inuit literary critical tradition is very much in existence, and that the observations of Elders—as recorded in the Nunavut oral history projects—form the textbook for this field, and are deserving of serious study. Again, these critical texts may not conform precisely to the Western (or Southern) academy's desire for broadly delineated and universally-applicable methodologies. Rather, they provide students and scholars with a source of highly-contextualized Indigenous epistemology which is intertwined with the “nation”-building or political goals of the region. Texts like the *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series, then, though seldom studied in a literary context, have a crucial role to play in the project of integrating Indigenous intellectual traditions into the academy. And as the controversies around the dog-slaughter allegations, around Arctic wildlife and resource management, or around the Inuit role in Canadian Arctic sovereignty continue to flare, a widespread recognition of the expertise inherent in traditional knowledge—or in *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit*—cannot come soon enough.

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Notes

1. The Baffin Region affiliate of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), which represents Inuit under the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement.
2. “Makivik is the development corporation mandated to manage the heritage funds of the Inuit of Nunavik provided for in the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA)” (*Makivik*).
3. In 2002, Makivik Corporation had already completed 200 interviews.
4. “The review team met with executives from the Makivik Corporation and the Qikiqtani Inuit Association to obtain access to their statements, that related to the unlawful destruction of Inuit sled dogs by

- RCMP members, and to discuss the specifics of their complaints. A meeting was held, but the statements were not provided” (RCMP 6).
5. See J. Edward Chamberlin’s *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?*.
 6. “Knowledge that Inuit have had for a very long time.” The term sometimes also appears as *Inuit Qaujimanituqangit*. The meaning is the same; in the latter case the root is *qaujimaniq* (knowledge) rather than *qaujimajaq* (that which is known).
 7. See also Frédéric Laugrand’s “Écrire pour prendre la parole: Conscience historique, mémoires d’aînés et régimes d’historicité au Nunavut,” which discusses the process of creating a “collective memory” for political purposes.
 8. See Kulchyski and Tester’s *Kiumajut (Talking Back): Game Management and Inuit Rights 1900-70*.
 9. “The Inuit were now becoming the principal actors in a movement destined to validate and safeguard their traditions.” My translation.
 10. Thanks to Ooleepeeka Arnaq, who showed me the collection, and to Karen Routledge, who knows it well.
 11. Thanks to Ian MacRae for this information.
 12. Thanks to Dr. Andrew Stewart of Archaeological Services Inc., who gave me access to his collection of reports—several of which he had researched and co-authored—from the Kivalliq region.
 13. Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (the former name of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, or ITK – the Canadian national Inuit organization).
 14. “A discursive move deemed necessary in an era when the dominant ideology was defined by the denial of cultural differences.” My translation.
 15. Indeed, this flexibility (or tolerance) of diversity itself becomes one of the principles of IQ. See Angmaalik et al. (9-10).
 16. Nutaraaluk is originally from Kinngait (Aupilaarjuk et al., *Law 10*).
 17. “For them, such a project risks the formation of inaccurate generalizations that would not be compatible with the desire to respect the diversity of local experience, traditions, and histories.” My translation.
 18. “The people of Nunavut.”
 19. “*Kisumik unikkaaqtuarulutuinnamiik?*” (56). Note that the word “old” found in the translation is a colloquial usage – “any old.” The roughly equivalent Inuktitut postbase – *rulu* - means something along the lines of “darn,” and – *tuinnaq* - refers to ordinariness. Paniaq did not specify an *old* story.
 20. Alexina Kublu (Iglulingmiut) was one of the course instructors. The first volume of the Series contains a number of *unikkaaqtuat* that she learned from her father, Michel Kupaaq Piugattuk (Angmaalik et

- al. 2).
21. *Unikkaaqtuaq* is the singular; the plural (seen above) is *unikkaaqtuat*. In some dialects (such as Nattilingmiutitut), the spelling *unipkaaqtuaq* is used.
 22. *Inuusiq* means “one’s life; one’s experience” (Spalding 27). *Inuusirminik unikkaat* is the term used in the *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series to refer to Elders’ life histories.
 23. Personal correspondence. Peter Irniq is an Inuit cultural teacher, and the former Commissioner of Nunavut.
 24. My thanks to Saila Michael, who taught me about this word. Michael, who is from Iqaluit via Coral Harbour, teaches Inuktitut at York University, and has also co-taught the Inuktitut language classes at the University of Toronto with Alana Johns.
 25. Personal correspondence.
 26. Personal correspondence.
 27. “a good-length story, which recounts events that are either recent, or of a not-very-distant past.” My translation.
 28. Personal communication.
 29. A number of scholars have pointed out, meanwhile, that the factuality of stories is more of a Southern concern. As Ann Fienup-Riordan writes, “legends and historical accounts are considered equally reliable sources of information, simply referring to different time periods – the distant past and recent times. As such, legends and historical accounts exist along a continuum and are not mutually exclusive” (xx).
 30. “*lilaagaangugaluaq, unikkaaqtuaqsitiunngittualuugama*” (Aupilaarjuk et al., *Maligatuqaliriniup* 191)
 31. A story of a family dispute; Papik kills his brother-in-law Ailaq, and then lies to his mother-in-law about it (188).
 32. Note that the very good storytellers often seem to be other people.

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